

# Justice Meets a Fiddler

Ben Crawford

IT WAS a shabby Virginia town. I had been thumbing my way from camp, and the last lift I had gotten had dropped me in the town. One of those furious and sudden coastal summer storms had come up. I had made a mad dash for cover and found myself in court as a spectator.

The torrent outside had slowed down to a reluctant trickle when they brought the little colored boy in, and I had already got up to leave the courtroom. But something made me stay—whether it was the scrubbed shining sweetness of the boy's face, the almost comic woe-begoneness of his mother's expression, or curiosity about the cheap violin the bailiff brought in as an exhibit in the case, I don't know. But I do know this: I'm glad I stayed.

There was nothing formal about the hearing. The arresting officer, one of the town constables, stated the country's case succinctly. The boy—his name was Milton Evans—was found in possession of a stolen violin (Exhibit A), said violin being the property of Adolph Harwood, from whose store it had been taken illegally two days before. Harwood was busy tending his store and could not be present in court, but there was no question of identity; defendant's mother admitted that violin had come from the store of Adolph Harwood.

I turned my attention to the boy as the constable spoke. He was sitting quietly on the bench, with his brown hands folded in his lap, his feet dangling a few inches above the floor. He was not frightened. His features were mobile but serene, and his soft brown eyes took in the entire scene with childish interest.

His mother took the stand, nervous, bewildered. The judge leaned forward and directed his questions down to her. "You say this violin came from Harwood's?" he asked.

"Yessuh. From Harwood's."

"Did your boy steal it from Harwood's?"

"Nossuh. Didn't steal it."

"Did he buy it there?"

"Nossuh. Didn't buy it."

The judge's tone became sharp. "Come now, if he didn't buy it he must have taken it . . . stolen it."

She shook her head and looked about the courtroom, as though in a desperate search for someone who could understand. Then she turned back to the judge. "He didn't buy it, nor he didn't steal it, Judge. It was done given to him."

There was a guffaw from one of the spectators, cut short by a rap of the judge's gavel.

"Did Mr. Harwood give it to him?"

"Oh, nossuh."

The judge's voice was impatient. "Who did? Now I want the truth."

"This is the truth, Judge." Her voice was solemn. "The sperrit done give it to him."

There was a moment of shocked silence, and then the courtroom resounded with hoarse laughter. At last the judge's gavel hammered the court into silence, but a grin remained on every face. The judge looked at her sternly. "Your boy is on trial. If you want to help him you got to tell the truth."

"I sure ain't lying, suh. . ." She looked around her, helplessly, till finally her eyes came to rest on her son and she seemed to summon up the courage to speak. Her voice was halting, uneasy, but it had the ring of sincerity.

"Judge, Milton he done been born musical. . ." There was a titter from several spectators but the judge quelled them with a glance and the woman went on: "Yes, he was. He a natu'al-born musician and he done been able to make fiddle music long 'fore he even had a fiddle. He sure did want a fiddle bad, but never did have no money to buy him one. Then the sperrit he done took a hand and give him one. Now he able to make fiddle music on a real fiddle. It sure is better that way. . ."

When she had finished her incredible recital, the judge cleared his throat and the spectators sat forward in anticipation. I could tell nothing from his bland, expressionless face. He spoke slowly: "You said Milton could play the fiddle even before he had one?"

"Yessuh. It was just borned in him."

"Then he can play it now?"

"Sure can, Judge. First time he ever touched a fiddle—when the sperrit done give him one—he played on it and the music

came out just as pretty and sweet. He never had to learn none, 'cause he always could play the fiddle, even before—"

"All right. . ." The judge waved her out of the chair. She got up uncertainly, stepped down, and went back to the bench beside her son. The judge was rubbing his chin. He lifted his head slightly and said, "Milton Evans to the stand." The spectators watched as the boy rose and started to walk forward. "Now, Milton," the judge said when the boy was seated, "your maw tells me you can play that fiddle the spirit gave you."

The boy's voice was shy, and I had to strain to hear it. "Yesuh. That's why he give it to me. 'Cause I could play and never didn't have no fiddle to play. . ."

The judge said, "Well, we'll see if your story is true, son. We'll have you play that fiddle right here in the courtroom, and if it's like you say, that you can play, we'll all know the spirit gave you that fiddle." He turned to the bailiff. "Avery, bring that darn thing up here and give it to the boy."

The spectators began to nudge each other. I sat there as though I were rooted, watching the boy adjust the violin under his chin and pick up the bow from where the bailiff had placed it on the chair. His face was lit with a quiet pleasure.

Then he began to play.

It's difficult for me to describe what it sounded like. It wasn't music. It was just a little boy scraping noisily at a fiddle. Yet if you looked at the boy's face, at his shy absorption and the expression of pure joy and satisfaction on his face, you couldn't help feeling that somehow that squeaking discord *was* music. I looked up past the tittering spectators to the bench. The judge was sitting forward with his hands folded in front of him and his features set in a permanent wince.

At last he moved. He spoke to the boy, who took the violin from under his chin and held it, with the bow, across his lap. He was smiling shyly at his mother who smiled back. I saw the judge's eyes go sharply from mother to son, to the mother, then back to the boy where they rested. He cleared his throat and the spectators again nudged each other. Then he spoke.

"Son," he said slowly, "that's mighty fine fiddling." The boy smiled up at him with innocent delight. "Yes, son, mighty fine fiddling. . ." He rapped his gavel sharply and turned to face the courtroom. "It is the court's opinion that the defendant was

given the said fiddle by a spirit and did not steal it. Not guilty. Case is dismissed."

He cleared his throat and for the first time a smile appeared on his lips fleetingly. "In order that full justice be done," he added dryly, "and since the spirit happens to be temporarily low in funds, the court will personally reimburse Mr. Harwood for the price of the fiddle." He rapped his gavel. "Next case, Avery."



## Sonnet To D. K.

J.J.S., Jr.

The naked song the slanted words the night  
 The ash tray dolls the chrome and leather room  
 Ice jammed in glass tipped cigarettes and rum—  
 The lips the scarlet nails the hands bone white  
 Twist blue refrigerated smoke past  
 Crimson murals into mirrored walls.  
 Forget?—in rooms like this the mirror seals  
 The mind; bare shoulders insolent arms suggest;  
 The highball numbs the cheek the fingertips;  
 The lips the urgent nails the music toast  
 The mouth with supple kisses; but the eye—chaste  
 Unsundered unforgetting—slips  
 With the smoke to green lawns behind the looking-pane  
 To watch Orion from a sidewalk in the rain.

